Fokkema on Utopian Fiction

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Please allow me to begin with a personal note. It is more than thirty years ago in 1980 that I first met Professor Douwe Fokkema when he came to visit Peking University and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing for the purpose of promoting comparative literature. That was the beginning of an exciting new period in recent Chinese history, known in China as the period of "reform and opening-up," when universities reopened after a ten-year-long closure and standstill, and the whole country started to get back on its feet after a devastating decade of the so-called Cultural Revolution, a period of political infighting and turmoil, economic chaos, anti-intellectualism, and complete isolation from the rest of the world. There was a real thirst for knowledge of the outside world among Chinese intellectuals at the time, and comparative literature with its characteristic openness towards more than one literary and cultural tradition became especially attractive to Chinese scholars. Many comparatists, such as Eugene Eoyang, then at the University of Indiana in Bloomington, John Deeney, then at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and Wai-lim Yip of the University of California, San Diego, lectured on university campuses in Beijing and elsewhere and introduced the concept of comparative literature to their keenly interested audiences. Professor Fokkema has a special place in my memory of those exciting early days of comparative literature in mainland China, which happen to be also the early days of my own career as a comparatist, not just because he introduced the idea of comparative literature with his characteristic enthusiasm and learning, but also because of the serendipitous arrangement that made it possible for me to meet the great erudite scholar Qian Zhongshu, whom I probably would not have had the chance to meet otherwise and thus would not have had the benefit of his mentoring and friendship if not for Professor Fokkema's initiative.[1]

In early June 1980, I accompanied Fokkema and in effect acted as his interpreter

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when he met some scholars from the Institute of Literature of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. He was so satisfied with my assistance that he asked me to go with him to see Mr. Qian Zhongshu the next day. At that time, I was a graduate student at Peking University, whereas Mr. Qian was a highly respected senior scholar at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, a truly legendary figure among intellectual circles in China and abroad, whose formidable erudition and command of several languages and cultural traditions were clearly demonstrated in his magnum opus, modestly entitled *Guan zhuibian* [*Limited Views*], which had just come out one year before in 1979. It was by accompanying Fokkema that I went to see Mr. Qian and witnessed a memorable meeting of the minds when I listened to their learned conversation on a wide range of topics, including Western classics, comparative literature, literary theory, and Fokkema's own book co-authored with his wife Elrud Ibsch, *Theories of Literature in the Twentieth Century.* And then, it was an interjection on my part on Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* that caught Mr. Qian's attention and led to my long association with him.[2] Professor Fokkema was also representing the International Comparative Literature Association, and he definitely helped the revival of comparative literature in mainland China in the 1980s. Thanks to his encouragement, I joined a panel he chaired at the tenth ICLA Congress held at New York University in 1982, where I made a presentation on the translation and performance of Shakespeare in China.

For a very long time since I left China for the US in 1983, I had lost touch with Professor Fokkema, though I knew he went back to China several times and was held in high esteem by many Chinese scholars. In early April last year (2011), however, I was pleasantly surprised to receive from Amsterdam University Press the complete manuscript of Professor Fokkema's latest book, *Perfect Worlds: Utopian Fiction in China and the West*, in which my own work was generously mentioned and referred to. I was delighted to reconnect with Professor Fokkema and exchanged a few e-mail messages with him, but later in the year, I learned the sad news that Professor Fokkema had left us, shortly after the publication of *Perfect Worlds*. I was very happy to have helped bring that excellent book to fruition, and perhaps the best way for me now to pay tribute to Professor Douwe Fokkema in this special collection is to write a commentary on his last book and its significant contribution to East-West comparative studies.

With training in comparative literature and Chinese, it is only fitting that Douwe Fokkema brought his life-long passion for, and his vast knowledge in, both areas to work on a tremendous book project concentrating on an eminently comparative theme—the idea of "perfect worlds," the utopian vision as it has manifested itself in both Western and Chinese literary traditions. "Among humankind no urge seems stronger than the desire for a better world," the author begins his book with this statement, and he makes it clear that as literary manifestation of such a strong desire, utopian fiction is universal and perennial: "There is no reason for assuming that the representation of such imagined worlds will ever come to a halt" (15). On the one

hand, utopian fiction is not pure fantasy, and on the other, it is not a blueprint for social planning, either. "The utopian narrative teaches us how to live," says Fokkema; "it is always more or less didactic. It does not simply indulge in wishful thinking or fantasy, but includes details about the political and economic aspects of society, notably in the European variant of the genre" (15). That may explain the value of utopian fiction not only for literary studies, but also for understanding political ideas and the historical condition under which those ideas arise. The utopian narrative may be fictional, but it always gives expression to serious social ideas with a serious social purpose, even though the world it describes may be positively idealistic (a eutopia) or positively nightmarish (a dystopia).

Based on extensive readings and critical reflections, Fokkema proposes four hypotheses as guiding principles in the study of utopian fiction. The first states that "*writers resort to inventing and sketching a better society, or what they consider as such, in moments of crisis, that is, when dominant ideologies can no longer answer the needs of the day*" (16). Utopia or the imagination of a better society already shows dissatisfaction with the status quo and therefore always constitutes a critique of the social and political reality of the time. Whatever is thought to be a better society presupposes a current society that is not satisfying, and stories about imaginary ideal societies tend to be told at such "moments of crisis" in various literary traditions. Utopia, in other words, always promises a better condition than what is available in reality. The second hypothesis concerns secularization: "*we will see an upsurge of utopian narratives among writers who have emancipated themselves from revealed religion*" (19). This is certainly true of the European tradition. "It was, we may say, a necessary condition for the emergence of utopia that the religious world-view prevalent in the Middle Ages should cease to monopolize men's minds" (22), as Krishan Kumar also maintains. "The aim to set up a perfect society on earth was ultimately blasphemy, and could not really be anything else" (*Utopia and Anti-Utopia* 22). Alain Touraine also remarks that "the history of utopia began only when society abandoned the image of paradise. Utopia is one of the products of secularization" (Touraine 29). Fokkema, however, is not content to limit utopia to European literature with a Christian background, so he extends this hypothesis to a wider coverage by proposing that "the emancipation from the unfalsifiable tenets of any given ideology which in its claim to truth resembles religious dogma may have similar consequences, though strictly speaking the term secularization does not apply here" (19). The point about utopia being secular, however, lies not so much in emancipation from a religious orthodoxy as in the human construction of a good society; that is to say, the utopian society is built by human beings without divine aid or intervention in this life on earth, not a paradise in afterlife in heaven. The conviction that human nature is essentially good or at least ameliorable constitutes an important precondition for the rise of utopia, and that is indeed the situation in China, where, as I have argued, "the Chinese tradition and Confucianism, in particular, may provide a model of secular culture quite different from that of medieval Europe" (Zhang, *Allegoresis* 173). Unlike

Christianity in the West or Islam in the Arabic world, no religion, be it Buddhist or Taoist, has ever become so powerful in China as to challenge the predominance of political power, and thus an essentially secular culture forms a background for the manifestation of utopian ideas in Chinese literature and political thinking without going through the change from religious orthodoxy to secularization as such, and forms a quite different situation from that in the West with the transformation from the medieval to the modern times.

Fokkema's third hypothesis is concerned with dystopia rather than utopia, for it states that "the closer we are to the practice of political structuralization and social engineering, including the realization of eutopian principles, the greater the chance that we will see an increase of dystopian writing that aims to expose the adverse results of any good intention" (21). This is of course based on the actual increase of dystopian or anti-utopian writings in the twentieth century when a number of repressive ideologies and political regimes claimed to have realized humanity's perennial dream of perfect worlds, while the reality proved to be just the opposite. Fokkema extracts from this phenomenon a theoretical argument or principle that utopia, once it is claimed to have been realized, leads to its opposite and self-negation. As the book deals with Western and Chinese utopian narratives, Fokkema made an interesting discussion of China and the West as moving in opposite directions, for while China is now assimilating "the pragmatic materialism of the Western capitalist model," the West "appears to relativize its own economic achievements by embracing values inherent in Chinese and other Asian traditions, such as respect for the natural environment and concern with stability and immaterial well-being" (25). From this Fokkema draws his fourth hypothesis: "Chinese and European utopian fictions have gone through opposite historical developments" (26). China and the West indeed took different paths in their respective social development and there were little, if any, converging elements till the last century or so. Differences in Chinese and Western utopian narratives are to be expected, and we shall see more on this in Fokkema's later discussion of specific Chinese utopian works.

In the introduction chapter, Fokkema makes some remarkably insightful comments on the nature and composition of utopian narratives, arguing that fictional narration is best suited to explore the moral question of happiness in an imagined society. The important question is: whose happiness—individual or collective, for each man or woman or for the community as a whole? "There is a kind of permanent dialogue among writers of utopian fiction about whether individual or collective happiness is to be preferred," says Fokkema. "Plato focused on the latter, and so did More, and to some extent also Bacon. In modern times the emphasis shifts to individual happiness with Huxley's *Island* and Houellebecq's *Possibility of an Island*. H.G. Wells, in his various novels, tried to steer a middle course. The political organization of collective happiness under Communist rule called for a dystopian reaction motivated by a search for individual freedom." He then sums it up by presenting China as a contrast to the West: "In all utopian writing there is a more or less explicit

opposition between collective and individual bliss, except perhaps in Chinese utopias where, if I may generalize at this point, the distinction between the collective and the individual appears to be expressed in less sharp tones" (27-28). Such comparisons are always illuminating, but not every time a Chinese utopia is called forth only to form a contrast to its Western counterpart, as when Fokkema comments on the reversal of male and female roles in imaginary utopian societies: "The whole idea of Amazon warriors and female roles for their men relies on the topos of a world upside-down, which perhaps can be considered an anthropological constant since it can be found not only in Occidental sources but also in traditional Chinese culture" (28). Here Fokkema mentions *Flowers in the Mirror*, a well-known novel by Li Ruzhen (1763-1828), in which we find "women behave like men and manage affairs outside" (28). Such "feminist utopias" do appear in different literary traditions and can be an interesting subject for comparative studies.

One impressive feature of Fokkema's book is its wide range of coverage, and yet it does not just run a catalogue of utopian narratives. The author is able to give sufficiently detailed description and analysis to individual works and also pay attention to various points of comparison. Not only Thomas More's *Utopia*, Tommaso Campanella's *City of the Sun*, Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*, and works by Étienne Cabet, Edward Bellamy, William Morris, H.G. Wells, Yevgeny Zamyatin and many others are discussed in some depth, but texts less usually found in utopian studies, such as the works by Joseph Hall, John Mandeville, Jonathan Swift, Nikolai Chernyshevsky and a number of Chinese writers, are also given generous attention. Spotting thematic connections among different works is a very helpful way to reach a general understanding of utopia as a specific genre. For example, More is brought into comparison with Plato when Fokkema remarks that "Whereas Plato focused on the well-being of society as a whole, More does not overlook the individual, and with all the austerity that he may have in common with Plato, More's focus on individual happiness makes him a man of the Renaissance, a modern man—although his views of course are not up to the standards of twenty-first-century human rights conceptions" (37). Fokkema also briefly comments on the utopian scorn for gold and silver that appears in several works: "The theme of the inverse value of gold, silver, and jewelry, hinted at in Vespucci's travelogue, is extensively discussed by More, it returns in Voltaire's *Candide*, where it is treated with a great sense of humor" (39). In his discussion of Chinese utopian works, he reminds us with Wolfgang Bauer that a twelfth-century chronicler Kang Yuzhi has recorded the story of a peaceful community where people "had no private property but possessed everything in common, and had no use for gold, pearls, or other valuable things" (182). Such uncanny coincidences, says Fokkema, point to the universality of the utopian vision: "The topoi of common property and the denial of the value of gold and pearls in this harmonious community, which also occur in Plato's *Republic*, More's *Utopia*, and so many other fictions about perfect societies, suggest an almost universal utopian imagination" (182).

Another common topos is the peculiar idea of premarital inspection of each other's naked bodies before a couple consent to marry, which More describes in *Utopia*. Fokkema argues that it "betrays More's intention to interlard his serious argument with an occasional joke. It also is an oblique reference to Plato's suggestion that female guardians should take their athletic exercise naked, together with equally naked men" (41). Campanella also writes that "all males and females are naked when they take part in wrestling exercises," but apparently Campanella is not joking, for his point is a eugenic one, namely, procreation of the strongest and the healthiest members of the society. Fokkema comments that "procreation is always a problem and as such a topos in utopian writing, from Plato and Campanella to *Herland*, *Brave New World*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *The Possibility of an Island*" (54). It reappears in a Dutch writer's utopian work, *Description of the Mighty Kingdom of Krinke Kesmes* (1708), where it becomes supposedly a practice in China, and the narrator is told that in objecting to such a practice, "the Europeans are not necessarily wiser than the Asians," because they would thoroughly inspect a horse when they want to buy one, but "when they intend to marry a woman, with whom one has to spend one's whole life, they abstain from any examination" (140). The premarital inspection of naked bodies is also a point of contention in anti-utopian writings, as it is parodied in Joseph Hall's grotesque description of Pamphagonia, the land of gluttony, where people admire fat and heavy bodies, and "maidens are not permitted to marry until a public examination has been made and the men have decided that their hanging chins have reached their breasts" (63). This is meant to be a satiric comment on More's idea of premarital inspection of the prospective bridal couple, and "Hall's narrative generally is considered the first specimen of European dystopian fiction. It set an example for a wide range of later negative utopian writing. The topos of irrational and unrestricted violence combined with absolute authoritarianism or totalitarian rule recurs in dystopian fiction of the nineteenth and twentieth century—Souvestre, Zamyatin, Huxley, Orwell, Atwood, and others—as well as in contemporary Chinese novels such as Su Tong's *My Life as Emperor* and Wang Shuo's *Please Don't Call Me Human*" (61). In reading Fokkema's helpful commentaries on different utopian and dystopian novels, we come to appreciate the author's extensive knowledge of different literary traditions and feel comfortable to let ourselves be guided by his remarks in exploring the fascinating and multifaceted world of utopian fiction.

By discussing Marco Polo's travelogue and Italo Calvino's use of Marco Polo in articulating a specifically "modern and twentieth-century interpretation of utopia" (139), Fokkema starts his more concentrated discussion of representation of China in the Western literary tradition. In the Dutch writer Hendrik Smeeks's description of the Kingdom of Krinke Kesmes, in which China and Confucius are mentioned several times, an interesting eighteenth-century principle of ethics and religious toleration comes out clearly as "the overriding principle: 'Treat others as you would wish them to treat you,' which is both a Christian (Matthew 7:12 and Luke 6:31) and a Confucian maxim from *The Analects* ('Do not impose on others what you yourself

do not desire'). This rationalist and not specifically religious maxim," says Fokkema, "was popular among writers of utopian narratives. It was mentioned by Fontenelle in his *République des philosophes* (written c. 1682, published only in 1768) and by Tyssot in *Voyages et aventures de Jacques Massé* (c. 1720)" (142). Among European intellectuals of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, China and Confucianism often offer an alternative to the Western Christian perspective, and "the admiration for China was to remain a constant factor in the Enlightenment debate" (145). Fokkema briefly mentions William Temple and Leibniz, and discusses the works of Pierre Bayle and Voltaire. Bayle recognized that "Chinese philosophers have embraced atheism but nevertheless on a rational basis have developed an excellent ethical system that aims to serve the common good." With this argument, Bayle "unmistakably contributed to the idea that morality could be independent from religion and that a virtuous atheism could exist, which not only relativized the value of the Christian tradition but also made the Christian belief in fact unnecessary" (146). The more influential view, however, which can be found in Leibniz and Voltaire, holds that the classical Chinese thinkers are not atheists, but "adherents of 'natural religion' without divine revelation" (147). From Goethe to Hermann Hesse and Bertolt Brecht, there is a persistent and strong interest in China in German literature, and with a detailed discussion of James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* (1933), in which Shangri-La, the elusive utopia supposedly located somewhere in the forbidden mountains of Tibet, Fokkema brings his commentary on the use of China and Chinese ideas in Western utopian imagination to a close. As Fokkema remarks, the utopia of Shangri-La "is not in every respect attractive," for it is a society where the highest value is moderation, and therefore passion and passionate love are impossible, and it is ruled by a strict hierarchy and an autocratic leader, and therefore freedom and democracy are also impossible. "The people in the valley of Blue Moon have no democratic rights," says Fokkema. "Apparently there is a strained relation between utopia and democracy, just as between utopia and eros. For democracy and erotic love have one thing in common, that is, the individual decision, which may depart from a premeditated abstract ideal" (161). Nonetheless, Hilton's novel is a great success, and Shangri-La becomes a brand name not only for a luxury hotel chain, but also officially adopted as its name in 2001 by Zhongdian, a county in northwestern Yunnan Province of China, "a Tibetan town profiting from 'a boom in Shangri-La driven tourism'" (162). Here we see a case of life imitates art in a bizarre and commercially motivated manner.

Helpful to readers who are not so familiar with traditional Chinese literature and thought, Fokkema situates his discussion of Chinese utopian fiction in the larger context of a brief introduction of the major schools of Chinese philosophy, particularly Confucianism and Daoism. Mainly concerned with the cultivation of virtue and the formation of a perfect moral being, Confucius has translated "the desire for a better world," says Fokkema, "into the image of the exemplary moral person or gentleman" (168). While introducing Confucian ideas, the author draws several comparisons at appropriate points to connect to the other works discussed

in the general context of utopian fiction. "Selfless consideration of other human beings (*shu*), modesty, restraint in speaking and action, loyal commitment (*zhong*), and generosity," says Fokkema, "are aspects of benevolence. The gentleman avoids excesses, like Plato's guardians, More's and Campanella's utopians, and the residents of Hilton's Shangri-La" (169). Confucianism has contributed to the Chinese utopian vision mainly with its secular tendencies that emphasize achieving perfection in life on earth, while Daoism has provided some alluring images of peaceful and harmonious existence of a utopian community in Chinese literature. In the classical example of Chinese utopia, *The Peach Blossom Spring* by Tao Yuanming (365-427), we find elements of both Confucian and Daoist origins, while in some chapters of the novel *Flowers in the Mirror* by Li Ruzhen (1763-1828) a thousand and five hundred years later, Confucian virtues and ideas are satirized in a light-hearted but effective manner. Fokkema offers generous summaries of both these works and notes that in the latter work, irony and satire are so prominent that even if on some level the narrative can be read as depicting a utopian society, the social condition as a whole seems so unstable and so much less than perfect that it cannot be truly utopian. For example, the Country of Women, where the usual gender roles are completely reversed and men are subject to female rule, "can be interpreted as an indictment of the inequality between men and women. In a sense the Country of Women is a feminist paradise, but there is too much distrust, violence, and cruelty to consider it a real eutopia" (189).

In Chinese literature, says Fokkema, we do not find as consistent a tradition of utopian fiction as we do in European literature, and he attempts to offer some explanations. The utopian desire in China is always connected with a strong emphasis on virtue, and as a result, says Fokkema, "Chinese utopian thinking rather ignored the social structure of imagined utopias, which further reduced the narrative space of fictional plots to a point where the writing of a utopian novel became almost impossible." Going further, he also points to "the Chinese tendency to think in terms of integration rather than separation, which can be found at all levels of Chinese culture: in philosophy, in politics, in medicine, and of course also in concepts of literature. Li Ruzhen's novel is a prime example of this tendency toward cultural integration, joining Confucianism and Daoism, earthly life and supernatural existence, history and fiction, myth and utopia" (193). All these make good sense, and the moralistic tendency of most Chinese narratives indeed puts more emphasis on the ethical implications of a story than on realistic depiction. There are, however, other reasons in the language and form of classical Chinese literature itself that tend to make elaborate narration and detailed description difficult, if not impossible. Like the biblical style as famously described by Erich Auerbach in the opening chapter of *Mimesis*, classical Chinese literature uses extremely economical ways of expression and often lacks interest in descriptive details, leaving much unexpressed in the text and "fraught with background" (Auerbach 12). Compared with Western utopian fiction from More, Campanella, Bacon to Cabet and Bellamy, Chinese utopian nar-

ratives are usually terse and brief, certainly much less concrete and less exhaustive in describing the social structure or the life style of a secluded imaginary community.

The nineteenth century with the success of industrial revolution and rapid progress of science and technology produced a kind of euphoria in the West about man's abilities to create a perfect world. As a character in Cabet's *Voyage en Icarie* (1840) argues, "after the invention of printing, the steam engine, and the railway, who can deny the perfectibility of humankind?" (202). Krishan Kumar has eloquently argued that to nineteenth-century thinkers from Saint-Simon, Fourier to Spencer and Marx, utopia was no longer a dream, but was on the point of being realized. "History had prepared the way, and history was now intimating its end in the modern utopia of science and socialism. An actual utopia was here in the making, in the rapidly industrializing Europe and America of the nineteenth century. What was needed were not wishful visions of perfection but scientific accounts of historical development, together with some precise indication of what needed to be done to usher in the new order as effectively and painlessly as possible" (Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia* 48). That explains the rise of a socialist utopia like Cabet's *Voyage en Icarie* that "anticipates later developments in Marxist theory and Soviet practices" (197), and also provides a background to understand Engels's contention that Marxism as scientific socialism had now superseded the utopian castles in the air that Saint-Simon, Fourier and Robert Owen had tried to build in vain. Of course, such euphoric belief in the progress of science and the perfection of social organization was not without its discontents. Émile Souvestre's dystopian novel, *Le Monde et qu'il sera* (*The World as It Shall Be*, 1846), as Fokkema notes, challenges Cabet and anticipates modern dystopian novels, such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.

As a comparatist with adequate knowledge of Russian, Fokkema not only discusses Dostoevsky's refutation of utopian socialism, but also the much neglected figure Nikolai Chernyshevsky, whose novel, *What Is to Be Done?*, made a tremendous impact and "added the particular momentum to the Russian revolutionary movement" (211). Fokkema provides a synopsis of the novel with its "kitschy plot" (218), but the interesting question he singles out is a dilemma that haunts not only this utopian novel, but the Marxist outlook of historical materialism in general. "Chernyshevsky nowhere explains how the course of history that is determined by material conditions could be altered by a single strong-willed individual," says Fokkema. "If the individual is the product of physiological matter and social environment, what difference can he make? Marx and Engels addressed the question of the revolutionary commitment of individual people in a world determined by the laws of historical materialism. They tried to solve the paradox by proposing that an individual who is aware of those laws should try to act in accordance with them: to help historical development, so to speak, by not obstructing it" (216). Fortunately, such out-Hegelian Hegelian conviction of the unbreakable "laws of history" seems now to have totally lost credibility and no longer dictates much of contemporary thinking, but unfortunately, before history proved itself to be more complex and more unpredictable than

such historical determinism claimed it to be, the feverish dreams of riding on the tides of development in accordance with the "laws of history" had done great damage to the human world in much of modern history.

When the dream of perfect worlds was declared to be on the brink of coming true in the twentieth century, utopia often yielded to dystopia in literary imagination. It was more in political theories than in literature that utopian thinking found its place, and as a result, Fokkema's discussion in the later part of his book often has to deal with history and politics rather than literary fiction as such. In literature, whether it is the Chinese writer Lao She's *Cat Country* or the Russian writer Zamyatin's *We*, memorable works seem to be all dystopian responses to the disillusion of what was announced to be perfect and ideal, but turned out to be depressing and horribly repressive. In social and political reality, what was proposed as utopian paradise quickly degenerated into dystopian nightmare. During the campaign of the Great Leap Forward and the establishment of People's Communes in 1958, for example,

Mao's China was being transformed into a utopian society. "Founded on the basis of agricultural cooperatives, the People's Communes replaced the wage system by a free-supply system," as Fokkema remarks. "The large common dining halls that were utopian in the fiction of More, Chernyshevsky (Vera's dream in *What Is to Be Done?*), and Bellamy were actually realized in the Chinese countryside. However, the free supply of food in the People's Communes, which according to Mao Zedong contained 'sprouts of communism,' led to the disaster of the starvation of millions of peasants" (322). Actually it was not only the starvation, but death, of millions in the countryside that paid the price for the totally unrealistic utopian experiments in China in the early 1960s.

Socialist realism and its Chinese variant made utopian imagination almost impossible because, as Fokkema notes, "like in the Soviet Union, political supervision cut off the possibility of writing utopian fiction, except that of an approved socialist-realist brand, which preempted any other utopian experiments" (324). But even religiously following the "approved socialist-realist brand," writers still ended up in trouble because of the political infighting and the constantly changing Party line. "To write fiction was hazardous enough, but to begin a utopian novel—a genre bound to touch on sensitive political issues—in times when censorship and public opinion were completely unpredictable was tantamount to suicide" (329). Fokkema mentions Zhao Shuli as an example: "It was a warning to everyone that the former showpiece of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism, Zhao Shuli, who wrote about the class struggle in the rural areas of Shanxi province, was persecuted to death in September 1970." Another writer, Zhou Libo, "who had always remained loyal to the policies of the Party and had won a Stalin Prize, was persecuted during the Cultural Revolution and officially rehabilitated only in 1978, a year before his death" (329). Literary creation became a risky business in those dark years. "Writing fiction in the 1960s was a dangerous thing to do at any rate," says Fokkema, "but writing utopian fiction without literally following the Party line of the moment appeared totally

impossible. And even if Party directives were closely observed, there was a considerable chance that by the time of publication they would have been revised once again" (329). The chapters in *Perfect Worlds* on Soviet and Chinese literature in much of the twentieth century make rather depressing reading indeed.

Since the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, China has gone through tremendous changes in the last thirty years in all aspects of the society and people's lives, even though the power to be tries its best to maintain the same social and political structure. Having gone through a long period of mental torture as well as physical violence and ideological extremism, no Chinese writer could imagine a perfect society in positive terms of a utopian tradition. So it is not surprising that Fokkema "could not find any post-Mao eutopian novel," while "the tendency toward sarcastic criticism, extreme pessimism, and a dystopian view of society appeared to be strong" (332). What he found popular is Wang Shuo's novel, *Don't Call Me Human*, a "devastating social critique…on a par with the dystopias of Zamyatin, Huxley, or Perec," while the only Chinese utopian novel he did find, *The Unexpected Island,* was written in English by Lin Yutang and published in the United States in 1955, which was hardly known to either Chinese or Western critics at the time, and "pales in comparison" with Wang Shuo's dystopian response to "the enormous traumatic experience of the Cultural Revolution" (343). That pretty much draws Fokkema's study of utopian fiction to the present time, which does not seem to be a propitious time for utopias. Fokkema has proposed that utopian fiction will thrive at a time of crisis, but given the collapse of dominant ideologies, both of communism and capitalism, we are not witnessing a sudden rise of utopian fiction in our time, either in China or in the West. In the concluding chapter, Fokkema self-reflectively comes back to the four hypotheses he proposed earlier, and the most interesting question is the one concerning his first hypothesis, i.e., the correlation of social and cultural crisis and the rise of utopia. Given the lack of important works of utopian fiction produced today, Fokkema realized that his first hypothesis does not seem to work, at least not in the form of utopian literature. He attributes this lack of utopian fiction at the present time to the general shrinking of "the republic of letters," to the fact that the utopian vision, the hope for a better future, finds expression "not in fictional narratives but in the plain language of reports, such as *The Limits to Growth* by the Club of Rome (1972) or Al Gore's pessimistic study of the environment, *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006)" (400). In other words, utopian fiction as we know it has indeed declined, and it is in the discourse of social scientists and even politicians that we may find the shadow of some kind of utopian dreams.

And yet, Fokkema insists, we need utopia as "a guiding perspective, as lights in the fog." In the end, it is still literature that promises to give the best expression to our desires and dreams of perfect worlds, and Fokkema reminds us with Calvino and Le Clézio—very much in the spirit of lofty utopian imagination, I may add—of "the role of literature as transmitting memories of eutopian situations and suggesting the expectation of a blissful future, offering an opportunity for reflection and keeping

readers aware of the possibility of other worlds or of a promised land" (410). The disappearance of utopia at the present time seems to have created an anxiety, a sense of need that is at the same afraid of being offered false supply and being deceived once again by empty promises. Some critics, notably Fredric Jameson, argue that in our time "Utopia seems to have recovered its vitality as a political slogan and a politically energizing perspective" (Jameson xvi). But Jameson's utopia is peculiarly defined as a sub-set of science fiction, not the literary genre that dates back to More's *Utopia*, Campanella's *City of the Sun*, or Bacon's *New Atlantis*, if not Plato's *Republic*. Krishan Kumar, who has written extensively on utopias and dystopias, has effectively refuted this claim by showing that Jameson has difficulty finding evidence in contemporary literature to prove utopia's continuous vitality. "Utopia needs its defenders, no doubt, just as communism did," says Kumar, "but it seems to be proving as difficult to create a literary utopia as to construct an acceptable version of communism (the two problems are of course linked, given the close connection of the modern utopia and modern socialism)" ("Ends of Utopia" 552). Kumar makes an unambiguous statement that "thinking and writing about the perfect society has gone out of fashion. Trying to whip it back into life, without the springs that spontaneously produced the utopias of old, is likely to result in the creation of ungainly and highly unattractive forms." Kumar, however, also finds the loss of utopia regrettable, and he calls upon us to study utopia of the past rather than turn a blind eye to the current reality of disillusionment. "But even if we cannot resurrect utopia today," he says in the end, "we have plenty to reflect on in past visions. The study of past utopias is perhaps the best way to ensure that the form survives, awaiting—who knows?—its time again" ("Ends of Utopia" 564). In that sense, Fokkema's meticulous study of utopia East and West makes a great contribution not only to our understanding of the past, but also, and more importantly, to our thinking about the future in a perspective much broader than before. Eventually, when its time comes and its form rises again, utopia, the manifestation of our desire for a better and more just world, will probably rid itself of the false promises and irreconcilable tensions, and will probably take a form that looks both alluring as a light in the fog ahead and illuminating as a guiding principle that points to the right direction and realizable goals. It is on such a hopeful note and with such a sense of preparation that Fokkema's book ends, a book worthy of our critical attention and contemplation.

Notes

1. I have discussed Qian Zhongshu and his importance in world literature and East-West comparative studies in an essay in English (Zhang, "Qian Zhongshu" 81-88).

2. I have written about that meeting of Douwe Fokkema and Qian Zhongshu in an essay in Chinese (Zhang, *Zouchuwenhua de fengbiquan* 221-24).

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